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ABSTRACT

The education voucher idea is reviewed and comparisons are made among three existing plans. The basic idea is that the government issues a voucher of monetary value directly to families to pay for education. Existing proposals include the California Coons/Sugarman plan from the 1970's, the Friedman plan, and the Jencks proposal. These plans vary from providing basic subsidies with little regulatory control to providing subsidies that include extra compensations for the poor and slightly more regulatory control over school standards. Sponsors of voucher plans believe that choice is a requirement for school improvement and that competition improves school delivery systems. They feel the plan's simplicity eliminates complex administrative processes, is inherently fair, and will add innovation and diversity to schools. Critics argue that the plan has uncertainties, that the schools could loose their common core curriculum, that costs could vary, and that it may require added bureaucratic procedures. They express concerns that a competitive environment brings potential for abuse, increases social stratification, and gives public support to religious schools. In the 1970's the Office of Economic Opportunity and the National Institute of Education conducted research on voucher systems, but it was unsuccessful and provided little information on whether such systems can work. Major questions about voucher proposals remain. (MD)

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Education Vouchers

James S. Catterall

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by
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Introduction

No history of reform proposals for the schooling of our children would be complete without a chapter on education vouchers. Voucher systems have frequently been offered as an effective way to solve many of the problems in education. Systems for establishing education vouchers have been proposed and supported by people of such diverse ideologies as conservative economist Milton Friedman, socialist sociologist Christopher Jencks, school finance reform lawyer John Coons, and President Ronald Reagan. And yet, the education voucher idea is probably the least understood of the many reforms proposed for American schools in recent decades.

One cause for confusion is the unlikely alliance of ideologies behind the idea, making it difficult to find a common purpose or meaning in the various proposals. Also, education vouchers have never been tried in ways that were faithful to the plans of their sponsors, making it difficult to sort fact from fancy when vouchers are discussed. In addition, a number of different systems for establishing education vouchers have been proposed, and each proposal would affect schools differently.

This fastback explores the important issues surrounding education vouchers. What does the term "voucher" designate? How can we draw meaningful comparisons among proposals that incorporate the voucher idea in different ways? What voucher plans have been proposed for our elementary and secondary schools, and by whom? What are the chief claims of their sponsors? Who are their critics, and how do they respond? What research has been conducted on voucher plans?

This fastback examines two major efforts to implement education vouchers in American school systems, including the federal government's attempts to launch a voucher experiment in the early

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1970s. It will also discuss a more recent, unsuccessful campaign to implement education vouchers in California through the voter initiative process. These cases will serve to illustrate the controversies that arise when vouchers are seriously debated.

Education vouchers have proved to be a most resilient idea as educators, scholars, and public leaders grope for ways to improve schools. The rejuvenated cries for excellence in our schools heard in recent months may bring forth additional pleas by voucher proponents that their designs be given a chance to work. This writer does not suggest that school voucher advocates are necessarily right or wrong, but rather that their proposals should be discussed in terms of the specific claims made for voucher plans. Also, these discussions should take into account the history of the voucher idea — a history filled with lessons for both public school critics and public school champions alike. And as a result of discussion and debate, we will understand better what we can and cannot know about the likely effects of proposed voucher plans.

The Basic Voucher Idea

In recent years, voucher plans have been proposed that differ dramatically in their purpose and in their specifics of implementation. The best known of these plans are described in subsequent sections of this fastback. But all voucher plans have in common a basic school funding scheme that is very different from the way our public or private schools are currently financed.

The basic voucher idea is simple. The government issues a voucher directly to the pupil or the family to pay for the pupil's education. The pupil or family selects a school and uses the voucher as payment for the educational program provided. The school exchanges all vouchers it collects in order to receive funds from the government.

A voucher scheme differs radically from our usual methods of funding and running American schools. Under our present system, we fund school districts directly through appropriations from local, state, and federal government. In contrast, voucher plans begin by funding the pupils. Voucher schemes assume the availability of choices among a variety of schools for children and their families. In public school systems, children are usually assigned to schools according to where they live, although about a third of the nation's pupils do have some limited choices among public school offerings. Voucher plans regard the *individual school* as an appropriate decision-making unit for providing education in a community. Because of this feature, under a voucher plan a school's success will be determined by how many students it can attract. Public schools do not exist in such a state of jeopardy. A final feature of most voucher plans is that private schools are also eligible for public funds. Currently, we provide very little public funds to private schools.

Understanding Voucher Proposals

Beyond the basic differences between voucher systems and existing school organization and finance patterns, the voucher idea by itself says almost nothing about how a voucher plan would work in practice. Behind the simple funding scheme outlined above lie many questions that must be answered before we can begin to assess the effect vouchers would have on our schools or our children. To cite a few: What level of government would administer the voucher plan? Which levels of education would be included in these plans? How much would vouchers be worth? Would both public and private schools be allowed to redeem vouchers? And who would oversee the operation of the system? When these questions have been considered, it soon becomes apparent that references to "the voucher system" have little meaning without a more complete examination of the specific proposals.

In order to understand voucher plans, it is helpful to examine the critical features that define them. For convenience, these critical features are discussed below covering three areas: finance provisions, regulatory provisions, and supplementary services provisions. With a clear understanding of these critical characteristics, we can use them to make predictions about the possible effects of voucher proposals.

Finance Provisions of Voucher Plans

The finance provisions of voucher plans govern the flow of dollars from sponsoring authorities to families and schools. Who pays for the vouchers, what the voucher certificates are worth, and what other funds in addition to vouchers may support participating schools are important

questions. In more detail, the important financial features of voucher plans are:

Sources of Funding for Vouchers. Vouchers have been proposed at one time or another for all government sources of school funding. The most common voucher designs call for the transfer of existing appropriations for school operations (which are an amalgam from several sources) to some type of voucher fund. In other words, if a school district spends $2,000 per pupil each year, then each pupil might receive a voucher worth this same amount. This voucher could be funded by all sources now contributing to the $2,000 level of spending.

Vouchers have also been proposed as an alternative way of providing only basic funding from state and local sources. Such schemes might allow for continued regular funding of state and federal categorical programs outside of the voucher system. Even more selective voucher systems have been proposed, such as federal subsidies for pupils with specific needs, with the federal government as the source of funds. (President Reagan has suggested this type of voucher plan, although without being very specific about programs or amounts.) Or a plan could specify unique sources of funds, such as combinations of existing taxes or special new tax levies, although the major plans proposed for American schools do not go this far.

The Size of the Voucher. The dollar amount attached to vouchers would govern what the certificates can purchase. The value is therefore absolutely critical for establishing what a voucher might accomplish in terms of educating a child. A $2,000 voucher in 1984 might obtain a rich set of educational experiences for a typical first-grader, but it might support only a meager education for a high school sophomore. The same $2,000 voucher might more than adequately support a school with low costs, such as one with only a basic education program and low-paid teachers. But it might only partially cover the resources needed for a school facing high costs such as one serving children with exceptional needs. And if allowed, the same $2,000 voucher might inspire entrepreneurs to establish new private elementary schools (but not new high schools) because of the lower costs of running an elementary program. The point is that the types of educational opportunities available to pupils in a voucher system will be very dependent on the size of the

vouchers available. And since improving schooling opportunities seems to be the central agenda of voucher reformers, the value of the voucher is a critical issue.

Tying Vouchers to Pupil Characteristics. In addition to providing basic support, the amount of the voucher might reflect such factors as grade level or serving special needs students such as the learning disabled and the physically handicapped. To be able to serve all children appropriately in a voucher-funded school system would require tying voucher values directly to pupil characteristics.

Permissibility of Add-Ons to Vouchers. Schools may or may not be restricted to accepting only vouchers for payment of fees. In the absence of a prohibition against schools charging their students more than the basic value of the voucher, some parents would augment vouchers with their own resources in order to purchase a more expensive education for their children. The permissibility of add-ons would also affect the willingness of private schools to participate in a voucher system. For instance, a private school charging $3,000 for tuition would be expected to have little interest in replacing those revenues with $2,000 vouchers if parents could not be charged the difference.

Beyond this, the add-on provision has important consequences for children and schools in a voucher system. Permitting add-ons to vouchers would allow wealthier families to purchase rich educational experiences for their children. Families without available funds would be restricted to those educational options that could be funded within the dollar amounts set for vouchers.

Permissibility of Gifts to Schools. Even if add-ons are disallowed in a voucher plan, parents might contribute extra resources to schools through donations. Most existing private schools depend on this practice, and income tax deductions for gifts encourage them. As with add-ons, children from wealthier families would benefit from family gifts to schools.

The potential latitude of finance-related provisions of voucher plans suggests just how different the effects of the plans might be. Beyond the variations along financial lines is the important matter of creating a system that would administer a voucher scheme. A voucher issuing and redemption authority would have to be established. If the vouchers are

to vary in value according to pupil characteristics, a system that screens pupils for relevant attributes and delivers appropriately valued vouchers to them would be needed. Or if add-ons or gifts are prohibited by a plan, a system of school audit controls would be necessary. It will become apparent when we discuss actual plans that have been proposed that they vary considerably in the nature of the control systems that would carry out their provisions.

Regulatory Provisions of Voucher Plans

Most proponents of education vouchers suggest that schools to be funded publicly through these plans should meet certain eligibility criteria. The range of criteria called for in specific plans is very broad. The most critical are:

Levels of Eligible Schools. Vouchers are most commonly proposed for elementary and secondary schools. However, vouchers could be confined to certain grade levels or to certain types of services such as special or remedial instruction. Vouchers have also been suggested for college students.

Types of Schools. Voucher plans most commonly include both public and private schools as long as they meet eligibility criteria. Some voucher plans are for public school systems only (Mario Fantini 1973), and one plan includes a combined system of public and private schools (see the Coons/Sugarman plan).

Curriculum Requirements. A voucher plan may or may not specify curriculum requirements for schools that participate. These requirements might include particular instructional offerings, a minimum length of the school day, or a minimum number of school days per year. Specific standards and tests for the high school diploma could be established. In addition, specific types of instruction may be disallowed or promoted, such as religious instruction or teaching particular ideologies.

Personnel Standards. Teaching certificates or college degrees may or may not be required of teachers or other employees in participating schools.

Admissions and Dismissal Procedures. Some voucher advocates suggest that participating schools establish their own admissions criteria as

private schools do now in the United States. Others advocate more open admissions systems and lotteries where the number of applicants exceeds available classroom seats. Pupil dismissal procedures may be left to the discretion of individual schools or governed by specific policies in a plan.

Other Regulations. It should be apparent by now that a voucher plan invites wide-ranging sorts of regulations. School governance policies, physical facilities requirements, parent involvement mandates — virtually anything could be penned into a proposal. An interesting feature of the Coons/Sugarman plan, to be discussed in the next chapter, is the express prohibition against adding regulations beyond those called for in the plan itself. Thus we have a regulation against regulation!

Both the finance provisions and the regulatory provisions established under voucher plans are detailed and complex, and they raise a number of questions that must be answered before one can understand the likely consequences of a given voucher proposal. As with finance provisions, the regulatory provisions of voucher plans require a system of procedures and controls to ensure that regulations are followed and that participating schools are actually eligible. Specifying how the regulatory systems might be set up could be a part of a voucher plan; but more often than not, the details of regulatory provisions are left to those who would implement voucher schemes. Such omissions in the language of specific proposals raise many questions about the effectiveness of the various systems and controls in practice.

Supplementary Services of Voucher Systems

In addition to finance and regulatory provisions, supplementary service provisions, such as information and transportation, are often built into voucher schemes.

Information Provisions. Information services are regarded by some voucher advocates as crucial to the success of a voucher scheme. Because the selection of schools by pupils and their families is central to education voucher plans, accurate and complete information about different schools is critical. As families weigh their alternatives, certain aspects of schools are patently visible while others are more difficult to judge and more susceptible to misunderstanding or misrepresentation.

For example, a fundamentalist Christian school exhibits in its name the orientation of its program, as do other schools with particular institutional affiliations. However, such aspects as curricular content, methods of teaching, qualifications of staff, availability of resources, and educational outcomes are less obvious to would-be pupils and parents.

Information systems incorporated into voucher plans may require public disclosures by schools, specific information dissemination strategies, or access to counselors. The ability of information services to reach certain groups that would otherwise lack sufficient information to make informed choices is of critical importance. Limited-English-speaking families are one such group. Others include families that tend to change residences often and therefore must repeatedly seek new information about schools. Those who lack job and housing stability are also likely to need more information services than others.

Transportation Provisions. Transportation services are also thought by some voucher advocates to be a prerequisite to fair access to schools by all pupils. Transport provisions are incorporated into some, but not all, voucher designs. Families that can afford private transportation or public transit fares would probably have more school options within their reach. Those who cannot afford transportation to schools are likely to face a more restricted set of choices and would benefit less from a voucher plan.

Provisions for both information and transportation services for voucher plans are critical if school voucher plans are to dispense education services equitably. In any attempt to reform the schools, we need to understand just which pupils would benefit to what degree. As noted above, existing voucher proposals attend to these services to different degrees. Further, these supplemental services have financial consequences that must be understood in relation to other financial provisions. For example: Must transportation costs be borne by schools within allotted basic voucher amounts? How much will adequate transportation or information services cost? And how will these services be funded?

Taken together, the array of finance, regulatory, and supplementary service features of voucher plans allows for a high degree of latitude for

alternative voucher designs. One cannot talk about "the voucher plan" without considering the details of a particular proposal. This we shall now do through a comparison of three of the most widely discussed voucher plans.

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Three Plans for Education Vouchers

Economist Milton Friedman first sketched the application of the voucher system to our modern school system in the 1950s. Offered as part of an extensive treatise on the importance of freedom in our society, the voucher system proposed by Friedman did not provide much detail for implementing the plan. Friedman was primarily concerned with the inefficiencies of the public schools, the advantages of a competitive system, and the values of freedom of choice for families selecting schools for their children.

A decade after Friedman proposed this voucher system, Christopher Jencks, a sociologist working under contract for the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity, developed a highly detailed experimental design for testing the effects of a voucher system. Like Friedman, Jencks also considered competition among schools to be a remedy for the mediocre performance and unresponsiveness of the public school system. But Jencks formulated his voucher proposal in the late 1960s during a time of extensive federal government interest in poor and minority children, and his voucher proposal contains a strong emphasis on compensatory education.

The most recent voucher proposal discussed in this fastback was proposed by John Coons and Stephen Sugarman, two lawyers in California who specialize in school finance reform. In the late 1970s, Coons and Sugarman proposed a constitutional initiative for a state system of education vouchers in California. The Coons/Sugarman initiative was designed to overhaul the state's school funding system. Their initiative stressed both the benefits of a competitive scheme and the inherent fairness of the voucher system in contrast to the uneven per-pupil funding system that existed in California.

We begin our discussion of the Friedman, Jencks, and Coons/Sugarman voucher plans with some simple characterizations of each. But a major distinction among these three designs lies in the format in which they first appeared. Friedman's plan is a chapter that appears in one of his books. Jencks' design was issued in hundreds of pages as a proposal for a federal experiment. And the Coons/Sugarman plan was written as a voter initiative.

The details of these plans in part reflect these differing formats. Friedman concentrates on a fundamental framework for his system and suggests a minimum of regulation and no supplementary services. Jencks suggests many detailed provisions and guarantees. Coons and Sugarman fall in between these treatments — they are specific on critical elements of their proposed system and leave much of the balance up to the state legislature. Coons and Sugarman, our most recent voucher sponsors, were constrained by having to tailor their design to the form appropriate for a constitutional initiative.

To compare these three plans and to make informed speculation about their effects requires a thorough examination of their principal provisions for finance, regulation, and supplementary services. It is from these features, and not in the stated rationales of their sponsors, that supportable hypotheses about the effects of specific plans can be generated. The features of the three plans are summarized in Figure 1. A more complete discussion of their detailed provisions follows.

Finance Comparisons

The Friedman plan calls for a uniform voucher for each elementary and secondary school child. His plan does not specify sources of revenue, but his design implicitly involves replacing existing subsidies to schools with vouchers to pupils. Friedman's design allows add-ons to vouchers. That is, participating schools would be able to charge extra fees beyond the value of the voucher, and parents could thus seek more costly educational experiences than could be purchased with a voucher alone. Under the Friedman proposal, parents also would be permitted to contribute funds to schools. No other financial features are discussed in his brief sketch.

Features	Friedman	Jencks	Coons/Sugarman
Finance			
Levels	K-12	primarily elementary	K-12
Amount	basic subsidy	basic subsidy plus compensatory subsidies	basic subsidy less 10%. May vary by pupil characteristics
Source of funds	all existing sources	existing sources plus special federal experiment funds	State of California
Add-Ons	allowed	disallowed	uncertain
Gifts	allowed	disallowed	allowed
Others			spending limitation
Regulation			
Curriculum	suggests very basic requirements	existing requirements	existing private school standards (minimal)
Ideology	no prohibitions	no avowed racist, anarchist schools	no prohibitions
Religion	no prohibitions	allowed for private participants	allowed for private participants
Unlawful Activity	disallowed	disallowed	disallowed
Personnel	no requirements	existing state requirements	teachers must be "capable of teaching"
Admissions	schools to decide	part lottery	lottery
Others			prohibition against adding to regulations
Supplementary Services			
Information	not mandated	mandated	mandated
Transportation	not mandated	mandated	mandated

Figure 1. A comparison of the education voucher plans proposed by Milton Friedman, Christopher Jencks, and John Coons and Stephen Sugarman.

The Jencks proposal, designed for elementary schools, contains much more detailed and stringent finance provisions. As with Friedman, the basic voucher would reflect the cost of schooling. Since Jencks' plan was a design for a proposed experiment without a specific location, the actual value of the vouchers was to be determined by the costs of schooling in the area chosen for the experiment. His plan calls for supplementary federal funds, in addition to the regular district funds, to be distributed through vouchers — with extra funds going to poor children. To apply Jencks' design outside of the experimental setting, the transfer of existing funds for schools to a voucher fund is implicit. Under the Jencks plan, schools would be permitted to obtain funding from outside agencies, but they would not be allowed to charge extra fees beyond the voucher. Private contributions to schools would also not be allowed.

The Coons/Sugarman system proposed for California would extend education vouchers to all elementary and secondary school children in the state. California would fund these certificates essentially as it now funds the operations of school districts, except that the state per-pupil subsidies would take the form of a voucher. (Since the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978, public school funding is annually determined and appropriated by the state legislature in California.) The value of the voucher would be set at a level equivalent to 90% of statewide per-pupil costs. The 90% stipulation was a suggestion by the sponsors that voucher schools could thrive with less money than that allocated to the public schools — competition would compel some efficiencies. At the time Coons and Sugarman proposed their measure, the value of each education voucher would have been almost $2,000. Within this average value, the proposal authorizes the legislature to create a scheme allowing the value of vouchers to vary according to a variety of pupil characteristics: grade level, curriculum, bilingualism, special needs and handicaps, variations in local costs, the need to encourage racial desegregation, or any other characteristic deemed important.

The Coons/Sugarman proposal's provision for parental add-ons to vouchers is ambiguous — the sponsors were adamant that add-ons were banned by the initiative's language, but some argued otherwise. The plan does not prohibit gifts and contributions to schools by parents. The

plan does specify a spending limitation for the entire state school system that would remain in effect for seven years (this is an example of the miscellaneous regulations that could go into a plan). The plan was to be phased in over a four-year period if enacted.

Regulations Comparisons

The Friedman plan calls for little regulation. It sets out no specific curriculum requirements but suggests that they should be confined to training in basic language and mathematics skills and civic values. His plan contains no restrictions on a school's orientation toward ideology, philosophy, politics, or religion. Also, it does not set personnel standards for schools, such as required certification of teachers. These standards would be left to the schools themselves. And finally, schools would be allowed by Friedman to establish their own admissions practices, as private schools do currently.

In comparison, the Jencks proposal includes numerous regulations, although the details of many of the requirements are left to those who would implement his proposed experiment. First, schools participating in the experiment would have to meet the various requirements of the state and locale chosen for implementation, such as existing state regulations concerning private schools. The plan would disallow participation by schools with certain philosophical or political orientations (such as schools sponsored by avowed racist organizations), again with details left for determination by a sponsoring agency. Schools would be subject under the Jencks plan to existing school licensing standards governing curriculum and personnel. School admissions policies would have to be nondiscriminatory; and if a school is oversubscribed with applicants, a lottery would be conducted for half of the available places. The school could assign pupils to the other half according to its own criteria.

In order to be eligible to participate in the Coons/Sugarman system, schools would be required to meet the laws currently governing curriculum and personnel in California's private schools. These regulations call for a typical catalogue of curricular offerings, but they do not specify any particular course organizations or methods. No minimums are established for the length of a school day or school year. State cer-

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tification would not be required of teachers in schools participating in the proposed voucher system.

In addition to these basic standards of school eligibility, the Coons/Sugarman plan has numerous other regulations and prohibitions against establishing future regulations. Schools cannot be prohibited from participation in the voucher plan because of their political, religious, philosophical, or ideological affiliations. Schools are required to maintain nondiscriminatory admissions policies with regard to race and religion, but they can limit attendance to either sex. In cases where the number of applicants exceeds available places in a school, a lottery would govern admissions. Priority in admissions would be granted to children of school employees and alumni and to siblings of currently enrolled children.

In addition to the existing or newly developed private schools that might seek to qualify for participation in the Coons/Sugarman system, public school districts, colleges, and universities are invited by the plan to establish voucher schools that would be subject only to those regulations governing private participants. Also, parents are granted the right to petition their local districts to force them to establish voucher schools. Public school districts are further instructed by the initiative to "accommodate family choice" in their pupil assignment and transfer policies. And finally, collective bargaining rights were secured by the initiative for teachers in all voucher schools, provided that the bargaining unit's jurisdiction would be no larger than the employing school.

Supplementary Services Comparisons

The Friedman plan provides for neither information nor transportation services. The Jencks plan provides elaborately for these services. All children included in the Jencks plan would be offered free transportation if needed, and this would be funded by a central authority established to administer and run Jenck's proposed experiment (i.e., the federal government). Under the Jencks plan, schools would be required to furnish results from standardized tests administered to pupils in order to facilitate parent's informed choices among schools and to help evaluate the experiment. Information regarding educational programs, teachers' qualifications, and school facilities would also be made

available to parents. In the actual experiment that resulted from the Jencks proposal, information was disseminated extensively and regularly throughout the district by the media, mailings, and special counselors.

In the Coons/Sugarman plan, both pupil transportation and information services are mandated. Transportation costs within "reasonable limits" would be included in the dollar amount established for vouchers. Participating schools would be subject to "reasonable" information disclosure requirements regarding curriculum and teaching methods, personnel qualifications, resource utilization, and, if legislated, pupil scores on standardized tests. Independent sources would be established to meet special information needs of pupils, including the provision of counselors for limited-English-speaking families. Schools are prohibited in this design from providing false or misleading information to their would-be clients.

Arguments About Vouchers, Pro and Con

The details of these three voucher plans suggest the sorts of arguments that are made for and against education vouchers. Some of the arguments surrounding voucher proposals apply generally to the voucher idea itself, but some are raised in regard to specific features or systems in a particular proposal. First we will examine the general arguments of voucher advocates and the arguments that apply more specifically to each of the three plans outlined in the last chapter. Then arguments against voucher proposals will be discussed.

Arguments for Education Vouchers

Sponsors of education voucher proposals seem to agree on the importance of choice as a prerequisite to school improvement. They have uniformly claimed that choice is lacking in our public school systems. Friedman, Jencks, and Coons and Sugarman all offer analyses and prescriptions for competition among schools.

The Ills of Monopoly. The public schools are seen by voucher advocates as monopolistic enterprises. Their pupils are captive audiences. Except for the few whose families can afford private options, pupils must take what is offered to them in the way of schools. Complaints can easily go unheeded and mistakes unrectified because teachers and school administrators do not have sufficient incentives to respond. The numerous avenues theoretically open to dissatisfied parents and citizens, such as school board and legislative elections, petitioning processes, and open hearings conducted by school boards, are all portrayed as either sluggish or too remote to make decisions about individual children. In addition, the monopolistic school system has the power to decide *who* is qualified to teach, as well as *what* is to be taught, without much concern

for what parents might feel is right for their children. Such monolithic enterprises are ill-equipped to meet the great variety of needs among the children they serve.

The Virtues of Competition. The voucher is advocated as a way of injecting competition into our school systems. If pupils are offered alternatives and are permitted to shop for schools, two positive outcomes might follow. The first is that those who operate schools would have strong incentives to do things that would attract students. Schools that fail to meet their pupils' needs, in the eyes of those pupils and their families, would lose enrollments to their competitors. And in a voucher scheme the loss of pupils would mean the direct loss of funds. Teachers and administrators would become responsive in such a system, if only to preserve their jobs. A second benefit of competition is also touted: If pupil needs vary considerably or if individual children learn in different ways and at different paces, they might end up in more appropriate school settings through their own choices. The better matching of pupils to school programs through a voucher system might improve education for all involved.

Inherent Simplicity. Vouchers are proposed as a much simpler way of funding schools than the current systems. Existing school district funding typically involves a complex web of tax levies, appropriations for multiple special programs from several government levels, state legislative formulas that were generated to accommodate partisan interests, and so on. Administering the complex funding system requires many regulations and several levels of bureaucracy. The voucher is proposed as a much simpler way of granting an appropriate amount of support directly to the child. Schools would be funded to the degree to which they attract their freely choosing clients. Simplicity would result from the elimination of many of the intermediate levels of school administration in state and local systems.

Reduction of Bureaucracy and Overhead. Although the plans vary in the amount of central administration needed to implement them, voucher sponsors agree that there is too much higher level administration in the schools. If pupils are funded directly, much of the program supervision and control in state, regional, and district offices might become unnecessary. Such control would be shifted to the pupils and

their families, who could elect not to support unproductive or inappropriate schools.

Inherent Fairness. Voucher plans suggest giving vouchers of equal value to all students. This is embellished in some plans by tying the value of vouchers to specific pupil needs. This would resolve the long-standing debate in the school finance reform agenda over the issue of unequal pupil funding within states and even within school districts. Funding per pupil varies by a factor of two or more in many states, despite legislative and legal attempts to narrow such gaps. While voucher proponents are rather silent about overcoming the evident political resistance to such reforms, they do point out that a voucher scheme could simply eliminate the problem. Past finance patterns could be replaced with a voucher mechanism; and if children and their needs are the keystone of a finance scheme, it could be a fair one.

Importance of Private Innovation and Diversity. These arguments fall in the same category as those for increased competition. One way to make schools more competitive is to increase the alternative ways in which children could be educated. Including private schools in a voucher system is one way of doing this because private schools seem to vary much more than their public counterparts in methods, organizational formats, and philosophies. Many voucher advocates suggest that offering choices only among public schools would not amount to much choice because of their similarity. Also, the preservation of diversity in schools is claimed as a value in itself, a value that would be enhanced if private schools were eligible for substantial public support.

Arguments Specific to Certain Plans or Sponsors

In addition to the above arguments for voucher systems, Milton Friedman argues consistently and vehemently for the benefits of an unfettered free market in our economic and educational lives. A voucher plan meeting his standards would allow very minimal control over participating schools because control would require government regulation and the bureaucracy to carry it out. For the same reasons, he would not advocate government provisions for transportation or elaborate information services, because these also would require bureaucracies. For Friedman, more than for either of the other spon-

sors, a voucher system represents a way to get the government out of much of the business of schooling — that is, out of all of it except the basic support.

Christopher Jencks stresses the compensatory education potential of an education voucher scheme. Among the possibilities for vouchers is that of giving more money to economically or educationally disadvantaged children. We now do this indirectly in many of our schools through federal and state compensatory education programs. A voucher could have provisions built into it to enrich the instructional opportunities for needy children. Such a scheme could also save some of the federal and state resources needed for administering compensatory programs, and it would keep the money closer to serving the needs of children. Jencks suggests that information and transportation services are essential for protecting the interests of poorer families in a school voucher system, and he is willing to tolerate the expense and bureaucracy needed to provide these services.

Coons and Sugarman have long been concerned about the fortunes of the poor in California schools as well as in the nation; but they did not advocate specific compensatory funding in their proposal. They do suggest that the equal funding implicit in their scheme would be a big advantage to poor families, who tend now to live in lower-spending school districts. They also insist on transportation and information provisions. They suggest that our efforts to integrate schools have not worked very well and that more voluntary integration would occur if all pupils could choose their own schools. Finally, their plan has the unique feature of placing a cap on the state's school expenditures — a measure designed to ensure that the new scheme would not cost any more than current arrangements for California schools.

Arguments Opposing Education Vouchers

Views opposing vouchers spring from many quarters. The opposition is led, not surprisingly, by public school educators — after all, it is their institutions that are under the reformers' fire; and it is the control of established educators that is so directly challenged by the idea of vouchers. But teachers and administrators are by no means alone in

voicing skepticism. The academic community, in addition to giving birth to vouchers, has produced its share of opponents to the idea. Some have questioned whether the central tenet of vouchers, educational choice, would really produce equitable results and whether desirable patterns of education and socialization would follow. And many spokespersons representing private schools and the children themselves have not been supportive of voucher proposals.

Uncertainties of a Voucher Plan. Vouchers would definitely revolutionize the way educators do business, but many aspects of voucher plans are unknown; they can only be imagined. Implementing details have never been articulated fully by sponsors. And the reactions of educators and families to *actual* as opposed to *suggested* conditions that a voucher system would bring are impossible to predict with precision. Many questions are raised: How many children would opt for what type of schools? How often would pupils switch schools? Would vouchers adequately cover individual pupil needs? If a new scheme retains some existing public schools, how will they plan their operations from year to year? How would a mercurial employment market work for teachers? Would uncertainty drive teachers into other professions? Would we be subjecting our children to an irreversible experiment? How would things be rectified if no one likes the results of a voucher system, particularly if a constitutional provision has installed it? The unintended consequences of voucher schemes have not been addressed.

Survival of the Common School. Public schools serve some important public purposes that could be neglected in the organizational rearrangements implied by voucher proposals. Voucher advocates criticize the schools for their uniformity and for their failure to deliver on their promises, yet core purposes remain evident in our school system. In addition to developing cognitive skills and social attitudes needed by functioning adults, schools strive to foster democratic ideals, develop an appreciation of our pluralistic society, and serve to promote overall bonding with our national heritage. Voucher critics suggest that an extremely decentralized system of voucher schools would lose its common direction. Even if regulations called for the maintenance of a core curriculum in voucher schools, their actual practices might be impossible to oversee.

Added Expense and Bureaucracy. While voucher proponents see their schemes as simple, requiring less central administration, critics argue that the costs of a voucher system would vary considerably according to the features and services enacted by a voucher plan. An issuing and redemption authority for vouchers would be needed. If vouchers were valued according to particular pupil characteristics, mechanisms for evaluating individual pupils would have to be established. Some bureau would be needed to certify schools on an individual basis — an inefficient prospect. Also, pupil transportation is an expensive service and, if children are bused in different directions from each neighborhood, the costs could be astronomical. Information systems are likely to succeed in direct proportion to their costs, and other services provided by voucher systems might also result in higher costs. Implementation costs have never been estimated with any thoroughness for any of the voucher plans that have been suggested. For example, a 1984 voucher initiative in Colorado had its costs labeled "undeterminable" in the official summary printed on petitions.

Potential Abuses. In a system where schools operate individually and private entrepreneurs are encouraged, the potential for abuse is very great. Will profiteers skimp on education and make themselves rich? Would schools misrepresent their programs and qualifications? Would required curricula be maintained? Would schools illegally discriminate or otherwise violate individual rights? What size administrative system would be needed to curb abuses? Would freedom of exit for pupils and their families tend to control abuses, or would hucksters in search of fast dollars repeatedly wreak havoc with children's lives and the public's money?

Social Stratification. Critics argue that voucher systems would impede efforts to mix children from different backgrounds in our classrooms. Families might tend to place their children in schools with pupils from similar economic, social, or ethnic backgrounds. Critics who use this argument frequently refer to research that suggests that families from different social classes vary considerably in the values they would like stressed in their children's schools. Under a voucher plan working-class parents might choose to send their children to schools that stress conformity, the ability to follow instructions, punctuality,

and other things valued in the world of work. Upper-class parents and professionals might seek schools for their children that would reinforce creativity, independent and critical thinking, the questioning of authority, and other things valued by them. The result might be more stratification by social class from generation to generation and less tolerance of individual and group differences in our society.

Advantages to Elites. Critics argue that children from wealthier households might gain more from vouchers than anyone else. First, these parents are likely to be more sophisticated shoppers and ferret out more detailed information about potential school choices. They also would have more access to private and public transportation, thereby widening the range of school choices available. And if they are allowed to supplement their vouchers with private funds, their children would have the benefit of better funded schools.

Public Support for Religious Instruction. Voucher proposals generally call for the participation of existing private schools, most of which are church affiliated. Critics argue that supporting religious instruction with public dollars would be unconstitutional under the First Amendment. No education voucher system has yet come under scrutiny for compliance with the First Amendment provisions relating to separation of church and state. If a plan were enacted, such a test would surely precede its implementation.

More Control of Private Schools. A final objection to voucher proposals is raised by officials in the private schools, who often are considered to be potential supporters of the idea. As participants, they would stand to gain substantial public support for their operations, and the families of their students would gain a substantial savings in tuition costs. But the possibility that significant controls would accompany public funding seems to deter some private school officials from supporting the idea of vouchers. They apparently value their independence and self-determination.

Proposals for education vouchers and arguments pro and con are pursued quietly in the literature. However, the debate has been at its liveliest during two recent periods when vouchers were seriously advanced as policy proposals for our schools. We now turn to these campaigns.

Attempts to Implement Vouchers

Vouchers have never been implemented in the ways envisioned by Friedman, Jencks, or Coons and Sugarman; so the claims of education voucher advocates remain untested, and the counterclaims of voucher critics are still speculative. But both the extensive efforts of federal government representatives to find a site for a voucher experiment and the Coons/Sugarman campaign for their California initiative have made the idea prominent among education reform strategies. And because of these implementation attempts, many people with stakes in the nation's schools have had an opportunity to evaluate the premises and prospects of the idea.

Federal Vouchers: Who Wants an Experiment?

Protracted attempts by sponsors at the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) and the National Institute of Education (NIE) to launch a voucher experiment in the early 1970s fell far short of meeting the hopes and expectations of its planners. Using the Jencks plan for a compensatory voucher scheme, the sponsors' major problem was finding a school system in the nation willing to host the experiment. Most school districts and interested officials who initially entertained the idea quickly rejected it. Adding to the disappointment of those who hoped to learn more from a voucher trial was that the only site eventually agreeing to an experiment — Alum Rock, California — managed to secure terms from the OEO that conformed more to Alum Rock's local agenda than to the goals of the experimenters. The plan had been altered from its original design in order to sell it, and it never tested some critical aspects of voucher plans such as the implications of private school participa-

tion. The experiment and attempts to secure additional sites were further undermined by the transfer of its sponsorship to the National Institute of Education after President Nixon's 1972 decision to abolish the OEO. The NIE was struggling with its own budget reductions and uncertainties about its future, and its leadership was not enthusiastic about inheriting someone else's grand scheme for education reform. They had particularly little taste for ideas that were showing tendencies to be expensive and unpopular. And finally, the energies of federal voucher sponsors were dissipated in two near-misses for additional experiment sites. Extensive feasibility studies and implementation negotiations for voucher experiments in five school systems in New Hampshire and in East Hartford, Connecticut, culminated in last-hour decisions by the prospective hosts to cancel.

Two themes persist in these early efforts to establish a voucher plan: the failure of the idea to develop a constituency and the conflicts embodied in the nature of the voucher idea itself.

The Missing Constituency for Vouchers

If anything stood between the federal planners and the execution of a viable voucher experiment, it was the failure of the sponsors to muster a constituency for the idea at the sites under consideration. The planners and consultants were eager to try out their reform, but they failed to attract the enthusiasm of more than a small minority of school officials or families in the communities. In the few cases where planning actually proceeded, including the eventual experiment in Alum Rock, support came primarily from a handful of local leaders who liked the idea and were willing to exert pressure to carry it out.

The Alum Rock experiment was sponsored locally by the district superintendent, William Jefferds, who seized an opportunity to secure additional resources for his poorly funded minority-populated district. He also believed that the model would help to decentralize decision making in his 22-school district — an objective he pursued independently of the voucher experiment. Teachers and administrators in Alum Rock were atypical in the experience of the OEO's national search for a host school system. They did not voice opposition at any time during

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negotiations with federal officials. They seemed to trust the superintendent's instincts in the matter, especially on the subject of added financial resources for their district.

The New Hampshire attempt for vouchers was also carried on the shoulders of individual leaders. The promotion for the federal experiment was led by an enthusiastic governor and state school superintendent. A majority of members of the state board of education supported a feasibility study for the idea. But only after extracting promises of extra federal money, additional local discretion over the terms of the experiment, and the right to bail out, did the five New Hampshire school districts begin preliminary planning. All five districts eventually bailed out, and the experiment never got off the ground in New Hampshire.

The remaining near-miss for the OEO voucher experiment was in East Hartford, Connecticut, where more widespread support for the idea was generated than at any other site. The Connecticut legislature was willing to adopt enabling statutes for a trial, the East Hartford superintendent and school committee chairman were strong supporters, a majority of school committee members were in line, and the teachers were not opposed. But the school principals finally blocked the proposed experiment, apparently because it represented a direct threat to their authority in the school system.

The widespread disinterest beyond these active sites surely tells a more representative story about the inability of the voucher idea to develop a constituency. As Cohen and Farrar have suggested, the voucher idea generally and the Jencks OEO plan specifically were born in a "political vacuum." The sponsors appeared to have acted without evaluating the multiple sources of opposition and the apathy for their ideas.

The largest source of resistance the federal planners faced was in the school bureaucracy itself. Any plan that was based on restructuring the balance of power and authority between professional educators and pupils and their families would have to reckon with the forces that decide and legitimate that authority. As Cohen and Farrar state, "Vouchers, of course, were not just any change: They would have required the renegotiation of all treaties binding a city school system together" (p. 79).

The prospect of renegotiating these terms would naturally raise anxieties in all quarters of the system. From the point of view of the established educators, it was surely better to retain the security of existing arrangements than to jeopardize them for the sake of an untried idea. Those fears were natural reactions to an idea that assumed that there will be positive results from placing in jeopardy both teachers and schools that do not successfully attract and retain pupils.

If the educators' reactions to vouchers did not come as a complete surprise to federal voucher sponsors, the opposition registered by the other potential interest groups probably did. After all, was it not the children of poor and minority families who would be the primary beneficiaries of the Jencks design? Would not they be expected to favor the idea? And were not the private schools — especially the Catholic schools, many of which were facing severe financial hardships — potential supporters for vouchers? The answer was largely no.

Those who were considered to be a potential constituency for vouchers evidently saw more to question than to praise about voucher projects. Concerns raised by a number of groups no doubt contributed to the OEO's difficulty in organizing an experiment. The positions taken by the intended constituencies suggest a rocky political future for vouchers.

Catholics. The Catholic schools were crucial to Jencks and the OEO experiment because they were already the principal providers of private alternatives to public schools in the urban settings considered important by the sponsors. When the OEO searched for voucher supporters, the Catholic schools were nearing the bottom of a steady 10-year loss of pupils and schools, resulting primarily from financial pressures within the church coupled with increasing reliance on costly lay staff. The prospect of government dollars may have been attractive in their predicament, but the concerns raised by the voucher proposal seemed to outweigh the prospect of a financial windfall. The most important problem in the eyes of Catholic school officials seemed to have been the issue of control. That public regulation would follow public dollars into the Catholic school systems was the natural assumption of school officials, and the details of the Jencks design did not allay their fears that government would become a meddlesome partner in their schools. The

Catholics did maintain their consistent lobbying throughout this time for "cleaner" types of aid, such as an income tax credit, which would direct government aid toward the parents and not toward the schools themselves (see fastback #188 *Tuition Tax Credits: Fact and Fiction*).

It is not clear whether the constitutional issues surrounding public vouchers for church schools were a factor in Catholic schools' unwillingness to support the idea. Catholic school officials may have preferred to expend their political resources on a less intrusive type of assistance, such as tax credits, with hopes for more sympathy from the courts in a constitutional challenge. In any case, they undoubtedly anticipated both state and federal constitutional battles in order to participate in a public voucher system. And given their reservations about the idea anyway, the public and political struggle would probably not have been undertaken eagerly.

Non-affiliated Private Schools. No evidence of organized response from other types of private schools is evident in the analyses of the OEO experiment.

Civil Rights Groups. Blacks adopted a consistently skeptical stance toward voucher experiments aimed at their school systems. Their opposition stemmed directly from recent experiences in the South, where whites were establishing segregated academies as a response to the forced integration of schools in the 1960s. Any plan that offered whites a chance to flee, even though offering blacks the prospect of their own educational choices, sounded worse than the existing school situations faced by blacks. Further, the voucher proposal was offered by the Nixon-Agnew administration, which was publicly opposed to busing children for school desegregation. Naturally this aroused the suspicions of the black community regarding the federal reform program.

The Poor. The interests of the poor were central to the Jencks voucher design — extra money would be provided in vouchers for children from economically disadvantaged families — and the schools were supposed to respond with renewed concern to their educational needs. But the poor never rose to support the ideas of the OEO voucher experiment, probably because they were not organized into power blocs that could articulate and promote their interests.

Labor. Teachers were the only outspoken labor group during negotiations for voucher experiments, and they were almost universally opposed to the idea. For example, the California Teachers Association, the state NEA affiliate, bitterly fought the incipient Alum Rock experiment and used its influence to impede legislation designed to facilitate the pilot program. American Federation of Teachers President Albert Shanker was a steady opponent, decrying the notion of experimenting with children on a large scale by instituting irreversible changes in urban school districts for the sake of research. Even in Alum Rock and the other districts where serious consideration was given to experiments, teachers were not active allies of the experimenters — they simply did not oppose their efforts.

The organized response to the voucher experiment was almost universally negative. Those groups with established economic interests in the school system — teachers and administrators — were not willing to risk their positions for the purposes of an experiment. Parent organizations were not convinced that the plan would advance the interests of their children. And there was no outpouring of sentiment that the existing overall condition of urban schools, or of the public schools generally, warranted the application of such a drastic remedy as that proposed by Jencks and the OEO.

The Conflicting Concepts of Vouchers

The campaign for the OEO voucher plan suffered from an internal contradiction. Jencks had forged an unlikely marriage of ideas in his OEO voucher design. Friedman had sketched the basic education voucher principle as a way of applying the logic of free-market competition to the schools. The public school monopoly would be forced to submit to their newly empowered clients — or lose them to public or private competitors. Jencks adapted this rationale into his design but modified it by adding extra vouchers and extra support services for economically disadvantaged children. Jencks had two objectives: first to improve all schools through market incentives, and second to redistribute educational resources in the direction of the urban poor.

While both of these objectives may have warranted public support in the abstract, few people believed that any one voucher scheme was likely

to accomplish both. Instead, it seemed to have created doubts about whether either outcome — school improvement or compensatory gains — would ever result from vouchers. Free-market advocates questioned the bureaucracy and social engineering implied by parts of the Jencks design. At the opposite pole, critics questioned the ability of a free market to extend catch-up benefits to the poor and minorities. In sum, the Jencks plan appeared to contain unsavory provisions no matter where one stood on educational reform.

There was some useful information coming out of the OEO-sponsored experiment in Alum Rock. Gary Bridge (1978), a researcher on the Rand Evaluation of the Alum Rock experiment, has suggested that school location, and not program, was the primary concern of parents relative to school choices that eventually became available at Alum Rock. He also found that parents varied predictably by socioeconomic status in the degree to which they felt adequately informed about the experiment in their district. That is, the higher the socioeconomic status of the parents, the more likely they were to be aware that the experiment was underway. Denis Doyle (1977), concludes that vouchers proved their workability at Alum Rock and that substantial numbers of pupils availed themselves of school options in the district.

But Alum Rock did not represent a true test of Jencks' voucher idea. The absence of private schools, the highly charged experimental atmosphere (with its attendant monitoring and evaluating), and the homogeneity of the lower-middle-class suburban community all affected the experiment and prevented valid generalizations about how vouchers would really work.

The Coons/Sugarman Proposal and Campaign

Beyond the OEO efforts at Alum Rock in the early 1970s, the only sustained attempt to implement education vouchers in the United States occurred in California between 1978 and 1980. Law professors John E. Coons and Stephen D. Sugarman of the University of California crafted a voucher plan for California schools in the form of a constitutional amendment. Despite the campaign's high visibility and the unques-

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tioned credentials of it sponsors (they were key figures in the landmark *Serrano* v. *Priest* school finance case), it failed miserably. The petition drive fell far short of delivering the signatures needed to place the measure on the ballot.

The campaign for vouchers in California began in the fall of 1978, nearly a decade after OEO's initial search for an experiment and a year after the five-year Alum Rock voucher trial came to an end. John Coons and Stephen Sugarman created a sponsoring organization called Education By Choice (EBC), which consisted of little more than a group of advisors who met with Coons periodically during the campaign. EBC maintained neither an office nor a paid campaign staff.

The campaign for the initiative coincided with the publication of Coons and Sugarman's book, *Education by Choice* (1978). This document provides an elaborate rationale for expanding family choice in public education, the key arguments of which became the basis of their campaign. The overarching claim of these sponsors was the virtue of a more pluralistic system of schooling than the one currently embodied in the public schools; Coons and Sugarman prefer that a far greater part of what children receive in their education reflects the individual aspirations, cultures, and preferences of their families. In their book they develop the traditional economic arguments for vouchers. They also discuss social concerns surrounding choice and education vouchers, particularly concerns over racial integration; and they present arguments for voluntary forms of integration as opposed to forced pupil reassignments. The importance of the book in the campaign is hard to assess — it probably was read by only the more academically inclined persons in the potential audience.

The initial goal of the campaign was to qualify the measure for the ballot, which required more than a half million signatures of registered voters (representing about 8% of those who actually vote in California's general elections). The ballot was to be held in June 1980; under California law this meant the petitions had to be counted and certified by state officials by February 1980. Under state law, initiative petitioners are allowed 150 days in which to collect signatures; this required Coons and Sugarman to begin their signature drive no later than August 1979 in order to have 150 days to collect signatures and still meet the deadline.

The 10 months between the announcement of their intentions and the start of the petitioning process was an intriguing and active part of the Coons/Sugarman campaign. Numerous successive drafts of the plan were circulated by Coons and discussed in public forums. (Sugarman at this time was out of the country on sabbatical.) Comment and criticism began to appear in both the mass media and academic journals. It was the 22nd known draft that became the official version of their plan in the summer of 1979.

Coons' strategy was to expose his ideas to virtually anyone with interest in the schools and to gather reactions from his potential allies and foes in the political arena. He made more than 100 public appearances during this time, most of them at regional or state meetings of organizations representing factions in the school system — public school employee and trustee groups, private school associations, church groups, taxpayer organizations, parent groups, and groups representing various types of pupils — all before his plan reached its final draft.

The outcome of all these efforts was a bitter disappointment to the voucher initiative's sponsors. Few volunteers signed on to boost the campaign. No endorsements came from the school and family organizations approached during the petition drive. And the measure did not come close to qualifying for the ballot. In retrospect, Coons and Sugarman seem to have faced the same sort of resistance found by federal voucher planners a decade before. Beyond the core of reformers cultivating the idea, the initiative had trouble finding supporters.

Conclusions

What we know about education vouchers is undoubtedly less than we would like to know. We cannot foresee with any clarity the manifestations of any voucher scheme five years after it is implemented. In part, this is because voucher plans relegate implementing details to various authorities, and in part because many outcomes would depend on human and institutional reactions to new events. But we can sort through some important issues latent in the current status of education voucher reform ideas.

Most important, we must recognize that a variety of designs and objectives have been categorized as vouchers; so it is essential that we distinguish between the voucher idea, per se, and the disparate plans that include it. This writer suggests examining voucher schemes for their critical dimensions of finance, regulation, and supplementary services in order to draw meaningful distinctions.

Milton Friedman, Christopher Jencks, and John Coons and Stephen Sugarman, the principal architects of education vouchers for American schools, all seem wedded to the advantages of a competitive marketplace for schools and to the salutary simplicity of the voucher mechanism for school funding. In presenting their designs, these persons have been largely negative about the efficiency and equity of current public schools and uniformly pessimistic about the ability of our schools to improve through more conventional efforts. However, these sponsors differ dramatically in the degree to which the interests of the disadvantaged must be protected in a voucher scheme by means of such devices as compensatory aid, admissions regulations, and provisions for transportation and information services.

Opponents of vouchers are legion. Uncertainties surround the very nature of voucher schemes; and doubts are expressed about the bureaucracies needed to administer the schemes, the costs of included services, and the sorts of regulations to which schools and pupils might ultimately be subjected. Some critics question the ability of disadvantaged children to benefit from voucher proposals, and they find vouchers to be elitist schemes. Some suspect that individual schools would become more homogeneous and society more divided under such proposals. And the maintenance of church-state separation is a major concern of many skeptics.

Arguments on both sides raged furiously when the federal government attempted to institute the voucher experiment in the early 1970s and when the school voucher initiative was proposed in California at the end of the decade. The limited experiment that did occur at Alum Rock was not a source of major insight in the voucher debate because of its restricted terms.

The major questions about voucher proposals that remain are whether the risk and uncertainties of vouchers are worth taking, whether the schools are too intransigent to respond to political pressure, or whether there is much more to credit in our existing schools than voucher advocates acknowledge.

This writer concludes that the education voucher is a resilient idea, but one with limited appeal in the United States. But if school improvement is as elusive in the coming years as it has been in the past, renewed cries for vouchers will be heard. If our concerted push for educational excellence falls far short of public hopes, new converts to radical reforms such as vouchers may be won. And if the past serves as our guide, the debate will continue along the lines outlined here.

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